

Freed P.O.W.'s Carry Psychic Scars of War

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SAN DIEGO, Dec. 16—When Lieut. David Matheny drove home for lunch the other day, he saw that his wife's car was gone. He turned around and left without even going in.

Lieutenant Matheny was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam for about six months. Most of that time was spent in solitary confinement, and since he was released four years ago he has tried to avoid empty houses.

Douglas Hegdahl was also a P.O.W., and spent more than seven straight months in solitary. Back in this country, he found so many people "zooming around in a mad dash" that he

sought relief by driving to the desert and camping out. Alone.

More than 500 American prisoners are now held by North Vietnam or by Vietcong guerrillas. What will their lives be like when they return? What problems will they face? What changes have been wrought by such prolonged captivity?

David Matheny and Douglas Hegdahl are two of only 12 prisoners released by Hanoi since the war began. Their reactions to solitary confinement illustrate two important points. Each prisoner has endured a searing experience that will affect, in some way, the rest of

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his life. But each man is also different, with his own feelings and his own scars.

Consent to Interviews

Three former prisoners consented to long interviews: Lieutenant Matheny, 28 years old, a student at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif.; Mr. Hegdahl, 26, a civilian employe of the Navy in San Diego; and Lieut. Comdr. Robert F. Frishman, 32, who is posted at Miramar Naval Air Station just north of here.

Their insights are limited, since none served more than 28 months, and many current prisoners have been held for five years or more. All were released by 1969, before treatment apparently improved in the P.O.W. camps. But they are still able to give some sense of what a man faces when his life stands still, and then suddenly starts again.



United Press International and The New York Times

Lieut. David Matheny, left, Douglas Hegdahl and Lieut. Comdr. Robert F. Frishman

After release, each man saw little signs of how the world had changed in his absence. "I was watching TV, and I saw this guy named Tiny Tim," laughed Commander Frishman. "I thought, hell, maybe I was brainwashed!" Mr. Hegdahl remembers, "I didn't even know what direct dialing was, and I got a lot of headaches."

The habits of captivity were hard to break. "I'm still a pack rat," said Mr. Hegdahl, as he relaxed in his modern, bachelor apartment. "I realized that two weeks ago when I looked at my cupboard. Tin foil is so precious to you as a prisoner you would never throw it out. Now when I cook a TV dinner I wash the tin foil and save it. I don't know what to do with it, but I've got piles of it."

'Very Scary'

Prisoners become expert at slowing down and stretching out even the smallest tasks. Mr. Hegdahl, who left the Navy but still teaches in a training program here, remembered his release: "It was very scary getting out of the hospital. You have to gear yourself back up to a fast pace, and they're throwing all these decisions at you. They're not really doing that, but it seems that way, and even the smallest decision is a tremendous thing when all you've had to worry about is when you're going to eat a chunk of bread."

One of the most important areas of readjustment involves family relations. Doctors have warned P.O.W. wives that their husbands might suffer from such problems as depression or impotence.



Associated Press

Photographs of Commander Frishman, left, Mr. Hegdahl, center, and Lieutenant Matheny taken while they were P.O.W.'s in North Vietnamese camps.

Commander Frishman, who is on limited duty while surgeons try to repair a shattered elbow, was the only one married when his internment began. He has since been divorced, and while the marriage was in trouble before he left, he feels his capture "certainly didn't do the marriage any good." The publicity and pressure that dogged him after his release did not help, either.

"It's really starting over a new life with a new person," he said. "You can't say you're in love. That 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' stuff is bull. You're entirely different people and you're starting a new life with a woman you don't even know."

Mr. Hegdahl found himself feeling "emotionally callous" when he got back. But he also thinks that the experience of living with a cellmate 24 hours a day would make many men

more tolerant and considerate of their wives.

To some extent, all three felt defensive and anxious when they returned. "I was afraid people would make value judgements about my experience. I was afraid someone would question the way I conducted myself," conceded Lieutenant Matheny, who also left the Navy at one point but rejoined within a year.

"I didn't do anything prejudicial to the United States, but I didn't live up to the letter of the Code of Conduct. In order to survive you have to make a physical and mental judgment."

The code states that a prisoner should give only his name, rank, serial number and date of birth to his captors. Lieutenant Matheny regards that as an "unrealistic" idea that has placed an "added strain" on many prisoners. As he put it: "I can remember feeling after

my first interrogation, 'Oh boy, I'm in trouble. I have to fight these guys here and also worry about what will happen when I get home.'"

The men feel that this defensiveness will be aggravated by the growth of antiwar sentiment in this country. "Attitudes have really changed since a lot of these men left," explained Mr. Hegdahl. "People are turned off about government

and the military, and it will be a real shock to a lot of guys."

When they first returned, the men tended to glory in the attention and publicity they received. But after a while it grew annoying. Mr. Hegdahl felt that people treated him like "some sort of weirdo."

Lieutenant Matheny added, "People are always examining you. It's kind of a 'touch me' type situation, they want to see if you're real."

Commander Frishman feels that talk about "rehabilitating" the prisoners only re-enforces the impression that there is something wrong with them.

"After a while you feel used," Mr. Hegdahl said. "I don't know how many times a Senator put his arm around me and smiled into the camera, so he could say how much he was doing for the P.O.W.'s."

"People relate to you as a prisoner, not as an individual," complained Lieutenant Matheny. "It's a different type of notoriety. Some kinds you choose and want, and other types you don't choose to mention. It's not good or bad, but it's no kind of an achievement. I'd rather be known as Dave Matheny, fighter pilot, than as Dave Matheny, P.O.W."

Being a P.O.W. also has practical ramifications. Many prisoners are career officers whose lives have been dedicated to the military, and it could be

difficult to integrate them back into the service. Commander Frishman, for example, is physically unable to fly and will soon retire.

Some Benefits Conceded

Lieutenant Matheny feels he lost out on several choice assignments because he had been a prisoner and could no longer fight. A tall, athletic man, he is obviously restless as a student, and he hopes to get back to flying after the war is over. But he worries that he will no longer be able to "compete" against his contemporaries for promotions, and he fears that many prisoners will be in the same predicament.

All three men felt, however, that their experience had some benefits. "You have to rely on yourself completely," Commander Frishman said, "and when you rely on yourself you have to get to know yourself. Most Americans are never forced to know who they are."

Like his comrades, Mr. Hegdahl felt that he learned something from his captors: "Most Americans think of everything in terms of black or white, there can't be any shades in between. Then you look at the Vietnamese: they have 60 shades of right and 60 shades of wrong."

When they returned, the men saw their own country with fresh eyes. "I never real-

ized how abundant everything is here," Mr. Hegdahl said. "When you see the waste that goes on, it really makes you wonder."

Mr. Hegdahl knows about waste. As a prisoner, he would

take more than an hour to eat a piece of bread, stretching out the event to fill the vast void of time. But he always saved a small piece, so he would have something to look forward to before going to bed.